

Lamb on the Rise

BY JENNIFER HAZARD



On a recent Sunday afternoon, my family and I visited Stone Heart Farm, a 75-acre sheep farm in South Paris. Owners John and Doreen Simmons served us homemade lamb pie, applesauce, and a simple green salad for lunch. The meal was very different from the heavy (and pungent) leg-of-lamb dinners my grandmother prepared when I was a child. I was surprised by the lightness of the pie, as well as its mild flavor, and gladly accepted when Doreen offered a second piece.



photograph by Jim Bazin © 2007

John Simmons and his dog Tessie move the flock out to pasture at Stone Heart Farm

ENTREES FROM FARM TO FORK



John and Doreen Simmons with 3-day-old lambs at their Stone Heart Farm

Changing popular conceptions about lamb is something the Simmons—and other Maine sheep farmers like them—hope to achieve. Some are full-time farmers, others are part-time, but all are dedicated to raising a healthy, quality product.

Unlike lamb found at your local supermarket, which is typically raised in grain-based feedlots, the Simmons' flock is grass fed. John says ruminants are meant to digest hay or grass, and a processed grain diet is not necessarily healthy for their digestion. Flocks raised in feedlots are also inclined to gain more weight, which results in meat with more fat. According to John, healthy grazing practices contribute to grass fed lamb's flavor and consistency.

Gloria Varney at Nezinscot Farm in Turner couldn't agree more. During the warmer months, she uses a process called rotational grazing to keep her animals healthy and parasite-free. The idea behind the practice is to allow the sheep to graze in 12-acre sections of green pasture for a certain period. Once they graze below a level that could expose them to parasites, Varney moves them to a new 12-acre section of land.

Parasites are just one of the problems that can affect a sheep's health. The winter months can also be particularly difficult. Cold, wet weather can cause respiratory issues, even when sheep are housed in the barn. Varney, who raises her animals organically, strives to avoid antibiotics as much as possible. "Good, responsible care is what's most important to the flock's



Lee Straw and Olivia Atherton of Straw's Farm in Newcastle

health. Organic feed, rotational grazing, and water infused with vitamins and minerals keep their immune systems strong."

Lee Straw of Straw's Farm in Newcastle has learned a lot over the years about keeping his flock healthy and strong. Straw, who is one of the state's largest breeders, owns 100 sheep at his mainland farm and 250 more offshore. Throughout the year, Straw will bring several island sheep back to the farm to breed with his mainland flock. While the resulting hybrid is vigorous, it's challenging for the island sheep to adapt to a new environment. "The sheep are so well-protected on the islands. When we move them to the mainland, it's like taking a person from the outback and placing him in the middle of a city," he says. To help with the transition, Straw moves the sheep in the fall. This allows them to adapt to life on the farm before the chill of winter occurs.



Perry Ells of Ellsfarm in Union, with daughter Evie and a lamb named "Angelina Jolie"



Sally Merrill of Sunrise Acres Farm with one of her spring lambs

Timing is important when it comes to breeding and caring for sheep. Specifically, most farmers look to begin birthing—commonly known as lambing—during late winter and early spring, so that lamb is ready for market during the busy summer and fall seasons. Sally Merrill, who owns Sunrise Acres Farm in Cumberland, says the majority of her lambs came in January this year. A lamb, which weighs an average of 10-12 pounds at birth, typically matures to 120-140 pounds before its ready for Merrill to sell at weekly farmers' markets throughout the summer.

John and Doreen Simmons also work to have their lamb ready for the tourist season. The Simmons sell their meat to Cinque Terre and Vignola restaurants in Portland and strive to have fresh lamb available by late June. To do so, the farmers begin lambing in February. Fortunately, John, who is an E.R. doctor, and Doreen, who is an I.C.U. nurse, have plenty of medical experience between them. John says that most ewes can go through the birthing process without assistance, but just like people, sometimes they need a little help.

During lambing season, the Simmons' day typically begins around 6:30 a.m., when they check the barn to see if any of the sheep gave birth during the night. The ewes and their new lambs are placed in a confined area for bonding, which takes about two days. If bonding does not occur with the new mother, Doreen is in charge of bottle-feeding the lamb. She says this can be the most challenging part of her daily chores, as the feedings take time and patience. "New lambs tend to doze off during feedings, and they get a bottle at least four times a day," she says.

The dedication it requires to raise a flock is one of the most rewarding aspects of the job for John. In fact, Doreen says he'd never take a vacation without her urging. "He loves to work," she admits. "It's hard to get him to leave the farm." However, even with all of the work involved, John says the couple could never make a living on farming alone. "We would need to sell significantly more lamb and make breeding our main focus."

Like the Simmons, many Maine sheep farmers are challenged by the size of their farms and their flock. The market for lamb is growing in Maine, and farmers are unable to provide enough product for their customers. Perry Ells, a full-time farmer who raises sheep for wool, meat, and dairy at Ellsfarm in Union, counts herself among them. "I have a supply problem but not a marketing problem," she says. "My farm needs to get bigger to make a profit. Farm loan bills, as well as the cost of corn and feed, can be difficult for a small farm like mine."

Still, Ells feels fortunate to be gaining a solid customer base. Her grass fed lamb is available at highly regarded eateries such as Camden's Francine

Gloria Varney with a Shetland lamb and Huey the cat



all photography by Jim Bazin © 2007

ENTREES FROM FARM TO FORK



Coming up for air at Ellsfarm and Sheep Dairy

photograph by Jim Bazin © 2007

Bistro and Rockland's Primo restaurant. It is also sold at gourmet markets including Fresh Off the Farm and the Market Basket (both in Rockport). She believes the demand for lamb is changing as palates change, and she credits local restaurants for making this possible. "There's a new wave of chefs willing to go to incredible lengths to get what they need," she says.

Portland's Fore Street Restaurant and the Harraseeket Inn in Freeport take most of Lee Straw's island lamb for its freshness, consistency, and flavor. Straw says the uniqueness

of the islands gives his farm a marketing edge—almost to a fault. "There's a lot of interest from other restaurants, but I just don't have enough product to go around." Straw delivers 10 lambs every two weeks to Fore Street during the restaurant's busiest seasons, which amounts to nearly 400 lambs a year.

The new demand is a validation for Maine's host of sheep farmers. John Simmons says it's one of the most satisfying aspects of his job. "It's great to know people are happy with our product. We know we're doing something right."



Feeding time at Straw's Farm

photograph by Jim Bazin © 2007



Doreen Simmons with a few of the Stone Heart lambs

photograph by Jim Bazin © 2007



THE WORLD'S FINEST

HAND WOVEN BLANKETS, SCARVES,
WRAPS, COATS, BAGS AND COATS

ROUTE 1, NORTHPORT, MAINE

207-338-9691/888-526-9526

MON. - SUN. 10AM - 5PM

SWANS
ISLAND
BLANKETS

WWW.SWANSISLANDBLANKETS.COM

ENTREES FROM FARM TO FORK



photograph by Jim Bazin © 2007

Spring lambs at Sunrise Acres Farm in Cumberland

Stone Heart Farm – John and Doreen Simmons
 285 Streaked Mountain Road, South Paris 207.743.7796
 Where to find Stone Heart lamb:
 Cinque Terre, Portland 207.347.6154
 Vignola, Portland 207.772.1330

Ellsfarm and Sheep Dairy – Perry Ells
 1244 Clarry Hill Road, Union 207.785.2118
 Where to find Ellsfarm lamb:
 Francine Bistro, Camden 207.230.0083
 Ephemere Café & Wine Bar, Camden 207.236.4451
 Primo Restaurant, Rockland 207.596.0770
 Fresh Off the Farm, Rockport 207.236.3260
 Market Basket, Rockport 207.236.4371

Nezinscot Farm – Gloria Varney
 284 Turner Center Road, Turner 207.225.3231
 www.nezinscotfarm.com
 Freezer lamb available at Farm Store (on-site)

Straw's Farm – Lee Straw
 30 Brick Hill Road, Newcastle 207.882.6875
 Where to find Straw's Farm lamb:
 Fore Street, Portland 207.775.2717
 Harraseeket Inn, Freeport 207.865.9377

Sunrise Acres Farm – Sally Merrill
 42 Winn Road, Cumberland 207.829.5594
 Lamb sold at Cumberland, Falmouth, Yarmouth Farmers' Markets

THOMASTON CAFÉ

THE CAFE CONTINUES TO BE AN ESSENTIAL PART OF THOMASTON AND THE SURROUNDING COMMUNITIES, SERVING THE BEST POSSIBLE FOOD AND DRINK SINCE 1990.



"ENDURINGLY YANKEE, WITH A MODERN FLAIR."
 NEW YORK TIMES

SERVING BREAKFAST, LUNCH, DINNER
 OPEN YEAR ROUND

"EVERY TOWN SHOULD HAVE A
 RESTAURANT LIKE THE THOMASTON CAFÉ."
 DOWNEAST MAGAZINE

154 MAIN STREET, THOMASTON ME
 207.354.8589
 WWW.THOMASTONCAFE.COM



419 MAIN STREET, ROCKLAND 596-7447
 OPEN TUESDAY THROUGH SATURDAY 5PM-9PM